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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine if stress was one of the major problems facing today's secondary educators. If it were indeed a problem, the causes, the symptoms, and the methods of alleviating stress had to be known in order to prevent an exodus of stressed individuals from teaching. Research was conducted by reviewing relevant literature on stress, books and periodicals written since 1975, especially those written for secondary educators in the public school system. This investigation found stress to be a problem for secondary educators. However, for prevention or management of stress to be effective, educators had to know preventative techniques and how to use them. Some of these techniques could have been provided through school board policies or school district inservice workshops. Teacher support groups were considered a necessity for alleviation of stress and prevention of maladaptive responses through peer contact. Communications, with self and others, was considered the most essential ingredient in successfully dealing with stress. An extensive bibliography concludes the report. (Author)

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Identifying and Handling Stress in Secondary Education

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ABSTRACT

Identifying and Handling Stress in Secondary Education

The problem was to determine if stress was one of the major problems facing today's secondary educators. If it were indeed a problem, the causes, the symptoms, and the methods of alleviating stress had to be known in order to prevent an exodus of stressed individuals from teaching. Research was conducted by reviewing relevant literature on stress, books and priodicals written since 1975, especially those written for secondary educators in the public school system. This investigation found stress to be a problem for secondary educators. However, for prevention or management of stress to be effective, educators had to know preventative techniques and how to use them. Some of these techniques could have been provided through school board policies or school district in-service workshops. Teacher support groups were considered a necessity for alleviation of stress and prevention of maladaptive responses through peer contact. Communications, with self and others, was considered the most essential ingredient in successfully dealing with stress.

Many educators are leaving secondary school at a high rate. With continual changes occurring, such as performance based evaluations, merit pay, and scores of other problems, teacher stress is growing at an alarming rate. A high stress level, both in and out of the classroom, is one of the pitfalls of secondary teaching.

The problem was to determine if stress was one of the major problems facing today's secondary educator. If stress were indeed a problem, how could he deal with it? One needed to know what the job related stresses of education were and how to identify them. By identifying stressors in one's job, an educator dealt with the problem and either enhanced or preserved his career. Once the stressor was identified, then the educator chose from a variety of methods to relieve or eliminate the problem. Actively confronting the problem of stress resulted in a happier, healthier educator who in turn was more productive in the classroom.

This study of stress related literature covered only secondary school educators in the United States. It included the public school systems, but not the private systems. It included the years from 1975 to the present, since stress research was started in the early seventies. All sizes of secondary public schools were considered in this study.

One of the greatest problems in designing the study was that not all stress related problems were reported. Many times rural areas were treated as having no problems of this type so available information was incomplete. Fear of being an outcast for admitting stress related problems exists in some places, so these areas too were not reported or well-documented.

Stress was found to be a problem in today's secondary educational system. It was a problem facing every secondary teacher unless he had developed coping skills to alleviate stress. Without these skills low productivity, unhappiness, and physical problems resulted, which in turn lowered teacher effectiveness in the classroom.

For the reader, stress was defined as a non-specific response by the body to some type of external stimuli, both pleasant and unpleasant (Randall, 1980). Stress was the body's physical, mental, and chemical reactions to situations that excite, confuse, frighten, endanger or irritate the individual (Shoop, 1980).

Causes of Stress

Stress, for the secondary educator, was found to be caused by a wide variety of sources. Sometimes, physical characteristics of the individual were such that inner and outer demands led to stress. In many cases, health factors such as smoking, drinking, and poor nutrition placed excessive demands on the body. Most educators tended to place others and the needs of others first. Their own needs: security, social, and self-esteem, often went unmet since personal needs and interests rated low in priority (Sweeney, 1981). The individual either set self-expectations and goals too high or felt that achievement of these expectations and goals were not being met at an optimum level. Other educators found it impossible to respond to or absorb many new ideas or information without stress (Randall, 1980). The individual who could not keep an open mind and was not receptive to change constantly encountered stressful situations. While educators realized that behavior patterns changed with age and experience (Sweeney, 1981), the educator who did not accept this fact was not able to cope with stressful situations as they occurred.

Situational stress was more common than stress caused by personal characteristics. When an individual encountered too much change, even positive change, in a short period of time, stress was produced. Today's secondary educators have been faced with many educational changes which have included poorer working conditions, smaller budgets, overloaded classes, performance-based evaluations, reduction in force, and involuntary reassignments. The secondary educator also encountered many types of interpersonal relationships. Relationships of poor quality, or those filled with tension, conflict, or cold vibrations led to stress. The educator felt pulled in different directions due to conflicting demands of students, parents, fellow educators, and administrators. Many times there were no opportunities to resolve conflicts, which occurred because of inadequate communications resulting in role ambiguity. The educator lacked clear, consistant information about his rights, duties, and responsibilities, and how they could best be performed (Schwab and Iwanicki, 1982). Lack of input from educators on policies and procedures have also been the cause of many other conflicts (Zahn, 1980). Many educators have felt a responsibility to initiate change,

yet felt powerless to do so. Isolation in the classroom with larger classes, fewer teaching materials, increased paperwork, and increased discipline problems added to the feeling of powerlessness. The educator felt isolated with little opportunity to interact with fellow educators about teaching problems and job related situations (Sparks and Hammond, 1981). In an attempt to deal with their own stressful situations, the administrators have used the educator as a scapegoat: failing to reward good teaching and innovative educational ideas. This in turn placed the blame for failures in the school system on the educator, which produced greater stress (Cacha, 1981).

Combine these internal school problems with the external pressures of the community and you had an educator who was working under very adverse conditions. The news media's constant demand for improvement in the quality of educators created an attitude of defensiveness of their work, undermined morale, and caused effective educators to seek out new careers (Sparks and Hammond, 1981). As exemplified by the news media, educators saw the community's respect for the value of an education decreasing. The lack of parental interest in education, added to a decreasing status of

the educator, placed educators in situations in which they had little or no control when dealing with the public. Educators found no support or encouragement from the public in their efforts to raise the status of the educator.

SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

Educators had lived with stress for so many years without realizing that the problem of stress existed that they had trouble recognizing the symptoms. There were no classic models of an educator under stress. Each individual exhibited his own unique symptoms. Some of the physical symptoms of stress were chronic fatigue, headaches, changed sleep patterns, increased body movements, chronic back pains, stomach ailments (which include ulcers), hypertension, weight gain, eye problems, increased intake of alcohol or drugs, and heart disease (Jadin, 1980).

A second category of stress symptoms was the mental factors. Many educators felt alone and isolated. They felt that no one cared about them or their contribution to the overall school program (Roddy, 1979). Some educators developed a total lack of interest in the school and exhibited high absenteeism or counted the days to the next vacation. Educators tended to become

irritable and humorless with students and colleagues. A dehumanized perception of students developed along with a deterioration of teaching (Cacha, 1981). Trying to cram more and more activities into their classes and leaving very little time for student interaction was another signal of stress (Gray, 1979). Self-esteem dropped to a new low and the educator's outlook became very bleak. From these symptoms three main attitudes tended to develop. The "bitching syndrome" was defined as a constant complaining with absolutely no attempt at solving problems. Another development was the "red pencil mentality" in which the educator was always looking for fault in every plan the administration presented. Finally, we saw the "yes-but" educator who maintained a closed mind to all attempts at solving problems (Sparks and Ingram, 1979). These symptoms became more acute with the length of service in teaching. The initial joy of teaching slipped permanently away.

Stress Management

Many methods of stress management involved reorganization and control over one's own life. This involved re-evaluation of goals and redirecting one's life style. Gaining a perspective on life and career

through self evaluation was very important. The individual had to be realistic and objective in the reconstruction program. The individual began the program by listing the symptoms of stress that were recognized. To begin the process of correcting these problem areas, the first step was to achieve a relaxed state of mind and body. Relaxation provided the individual with both the mental and physical energy to adapt to stressful situations (Shoop, 1980). Mental relaxation could be achieved by any of several methods.

Transcendental meditation was a meditative approach where the individual was taught to sit quietly in a relaxed position for two-twenty minute periods each day and silently repeat a mantra (a nonsense word). Another method was the relaxation response, which was similar to transcendental meditation, but could be self-taught. The progressive relaxation technique was the process of tensing and relaxing each part of the body. Audiogenic training involved self-hypnosis, imagery, and suggested phrases to produce a state of relaxation. The biofeedback technique allowed an individual to monitor his level of relaxation and to achieve a deeper state of relaxation (Sparks and Hammond, 1981). Development of a hobby aided in relieving the tensions of work stress by

taking the individual's mind off of the school day. All of these methods helped the individual reduce tension and relieve stress.

To develop physical relaxation the body cannot be fatigued. Sleep was found to be an essential ingredient to a relaxed physical state. To achieve a good night's sleep, the individual had to take plenty of time in preparing for bed and then not take his worries to bed. No napping during the day could be allowed. A regular schedule had to be maintained. Exercise before bed was avoided since it would keep the individual awake. Eating and drinking anything, such as alcohol, medications, or coffee, was also avoided because they would interfere with sleep. If all else failed, the individual was to turn to the proven home remedies of a hot bath, warm milk, or a glass of wine (Sparks and Hammond, 1981).

Physical exercise was also a method recommended for renewing the body's energy after mental fatigue. Physical exercise raised self esteem because a person looked and felt better after exercising. It also helped to reduce anxiety and relieved mild depression. Aerobic acitivities were considered the best choice of exercise because they increase blood flow and oxygenation of the

muscles. The individual was directed to choose an exercise that could be done at least three times a week and was something which could be looked forward to after a day in school.

Advantageous eating habits were also considered stress reducers. Breakfast was cited as very important as the largest meal of the day. Recommended meals contained more protein foods and fresh fruits and vegetables and few foods prepared with sugar and salt. Above all, the individual was cautioned to stay away from junk foods (Sparks and Hammond, 1981).

Once relaxation was achieved, the educator could add a variety of self-help methods to achieve even greater stress reduction. Each morning the educator was to sit down and make a list of things to do for the day. The hardest task was to be scheduled early in the day. The educator was reminded to let students complete routine duties that they could handle (Sparks and Hammond, 1981). A break from demanding work was to be incorporated into the daily schedule. When the educator entered the classroom, all domestic troubles were to be left outside. The educator was encouraged to laugh often to help avoid frustration. Leisure time was to be left open, but something exciting that the educator

could look forward to was to be planned for each week. When the educator returned home, school work was to be left at school. The educator was discouraged from using weekends or nights to complete school work. This was the educator's time to plan leisure activities for personal enhancement. Above all, the educator was encouraged to be good to himself (Miller, 1979). Moe (1979) cautioned against feeling guilty if the educator did not feel he was living up to the ideal of the perfect teacher. By attending workshops and conferences, the educator could remain alert to the changing methods and philosophies of eduction (Teacher Burnout, 1979). Attendance at these functions was to be with the attitude "I will gain something to benefit myself as an educator." The educator was also reminded to be self-assertive- saying no, especially to unreasonable demands.

In addition to these self-initiated stress reducers, there were methods of interacting with others that could reduce stress. Improving communication skills was considered essential in dealing with stress. Talking with a friend was the major stress release technique. Educators needed to develop a support system which could have been nothing more than a trusted fellow

educator with whom problems were shared. The educator was to analyze the problem, then share it with someone from the support system and ask for feedback (Kirk and Walter, 1981). A creative plan was then developed for dealing with the problem. Alternatives that had been tried were discussed and the results evaluated. The educator was to determine why the alternatives tried had failed. Not all of the time spent with the support system was to interact on the existing problems. Time for discussions on the strengths of the individual and successes were to also be covered. It was suggested that the educator spend more time becoming aware of the people with whom he worked. In this way, he could observe their patterns of behavior and how they dealt with the pressures of stress (Shoop, 1980). The educator could then use what he had observed from the others to help in designing his own stress management program. Another vital ingredient in dealing with the pressures in the educational setting was sensing support from fellow educators and administrators.

Methods of Research

The information presented in this research paper was obtained from a variety of resources, 1975 to the present. The Resources in Education, Current Index to Journals of Education (ERIC) was the major source of information. The Education index was used to obtain titles of related titles as well as the Psychological Abstracts, and reference lists from books and articles read. Several books were read; some were not used for direct information in this paper. However, the information contained provided a guide for further research by researching the books and articles in the reference lists.

Conclusions

Stress was definitely found to be a problem for secondary educators. As shown earlier, the educator had used many crutches in the attempt to alleviate stress, but, being uninformed, was not able to use these techniques effectively. Stress virtually went unchecked due to the ineffective practices. A secondary educator felt pretty much alone with no one to turn to for help. Many educators had seen few rewards, if any, in teaching and, feeling more demands being placed on them by administrators and the community, had left the

profession of teaching. To avoid joining this exodus from the teaching profession, some educators turned to the various techniques for relief of stress: physical and mental relaxation, transcendental meditation, physical exercise, proper eating habits, self-help methods (planning routine duties and leisure time, leaving problems in their proper environment, being alert to changing methods and philosophies of education, self-assertiveness, and being good to yourself), and interacting with others. Many of these techniques could have been provided by school boards which adopted stress education policies (Kaiser and Polczynski, 1982). In addition, the school district could have offered in-service sessions on mental health techniques at their teacher workshops (Campbell, 1983). Teacher support groups were a necessity for alleviation of stress and prevention of maladaptive responses (Jadin, 1980). The support group consisted of a variety of helpers falling within three main categories. The "comforter" accepted the educator as he was. Sometimes the "comforter" became a "placater" as a "yes" person. The "confronter" forced the educator to focus on issues or behaviors he was not aware of or did not wish to face. The "confronter" became the "blamer" when he played the role

of fault finder, dictator, or a bossy confronter. The "clarifier" probed the issue and helped to define the problem. Often the "clarifier" was a "computer" in the correctness and reasonable lack of feeling exhibited (Miller, 1979). This contact with adults was very important for the educator in working with children and in dealing with the pressures in the classroom, frustrations with the system, feelings of inadequacy in meeting the demands of the profession and lack of free time for themselves . The support group gave the educator someone to share the problem with once it was analyzed. Feedback from a member of the group assisted in the development of a creative plan for coping with the problem (Shoop, 1980). Further, interaction with colleagues gave the educator the chance to verbalize successes and strengths which created a satisfaction with work accomplished (Sparks and Hammond, 1981). Staff morale was increased by contact with support groups. The positive feedback and constructive criticism received from the support group were essential for recovery of the individual in a stressful situation. The educator were given the opportunity to paticipate in a communal and creative problem-solving process with a peer group while receiving productive encouragement.

This contact with the peer group also made the educator feel less isolated (Kirk and Walter, 1981). Communications with the peer group were enhanced by a shared decision-making process, mutual trust and understanding, and open exchanges. Communication with self and others was considered the most essential ingredient in successfully dealing with stress (Shoop, 1980). Educators found that it was imperative that they learned to read the symptoms of stress, tried to avoid situations which caused stress, knew how to use the techniques to relieve stress once it was present, and, above all, learned to COMMUNICATE with self and others.

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